

THE WILD HORSES OF SANTA CRUZ ISLAND

How this unique herd originated — and how horse lovers are trying to save it.

By Kip Goldreyer

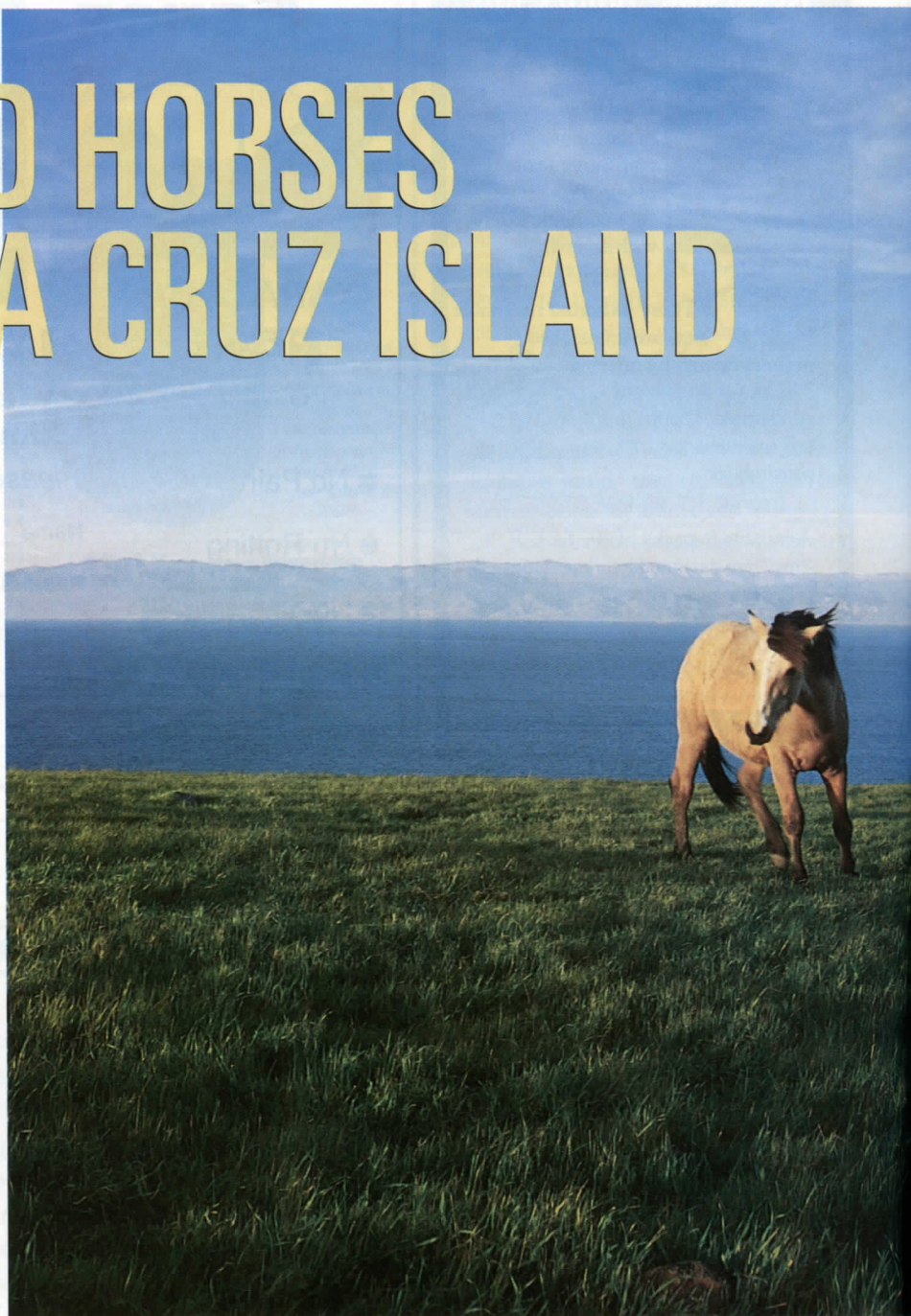
We've been hiking over the rough terrain of Santa Cruz Island for about half an hour when we round a ridge and see what we've come for: thirteen wild horses grazing on a lush, spring-green hillside against a backdrop of hazy ocean, with Santa Barbara and the mountainous California mainland twenty-six miles in the distance. The horses are short and stocky, with the look of old *rancho*-type Quarter Horses — coarse features, thick manes and tails, solid backs, and round hooves (nobody trims a foot like Mother Nature). Our "tour guide," Santa Barbara veterinarian Karen Blumenshine, explains that the herd has divided into two amicable subgroups. One comprises a bay stallion with four mares (the palomino alpha — or boss — mare, a buckskin, and two pink-skinned, blue-eyed lighter palominos known as "cremellos") and a two-year-old buckskin colt that Karen gelded a year ago in the interest of herd management; the other, a palomino stallion with four mares (a chestnut alpha, a buckskin, two palominos) and a chestnut colt slated for gelding this year.

Since only the alpha mares have been

breeding with their respective stallions, a recent arrival — a four-week-old colt — has put both bands' knickers in a considerable twist. Not only is he apparently the first foal out of a non-alpha mare, but the dam is one of the two cremellos who heretofore occupied the lower reaches of the herd's pecking order. Soon after foaling, the new mom brazenly approached the dad — the bay stallion — seeking his

attention and inducing him to defend the foal against her inquisitive former best friend — the second cremello. Within two weeks, Karen noted, the friend was sporting scrapes and cuts, a left-foreleg limp, and a mission: In an attempt to switch bands, she was nuzzling the palomino stallion — a no-no that infuriated the chestnut alpha mare.

But herd dynamics tend toward stabili-



The bay stallion and his band — including the cremello baby — check out visitor Susan Manchester, one of the many people interested in their welfare.



RICHARD ROSS

ty, not chaos; today, with the foal snoozing on a bed of flowers in the warm spring sun, the herd is healed and happy, and blissfully unaware of looming forces beyond its control or reckoning — legislative action, family bickering, money (lots of it), bureaucratic tunnel vision — that could well bring this benign island existence to an abrupt and possibly tragic end.

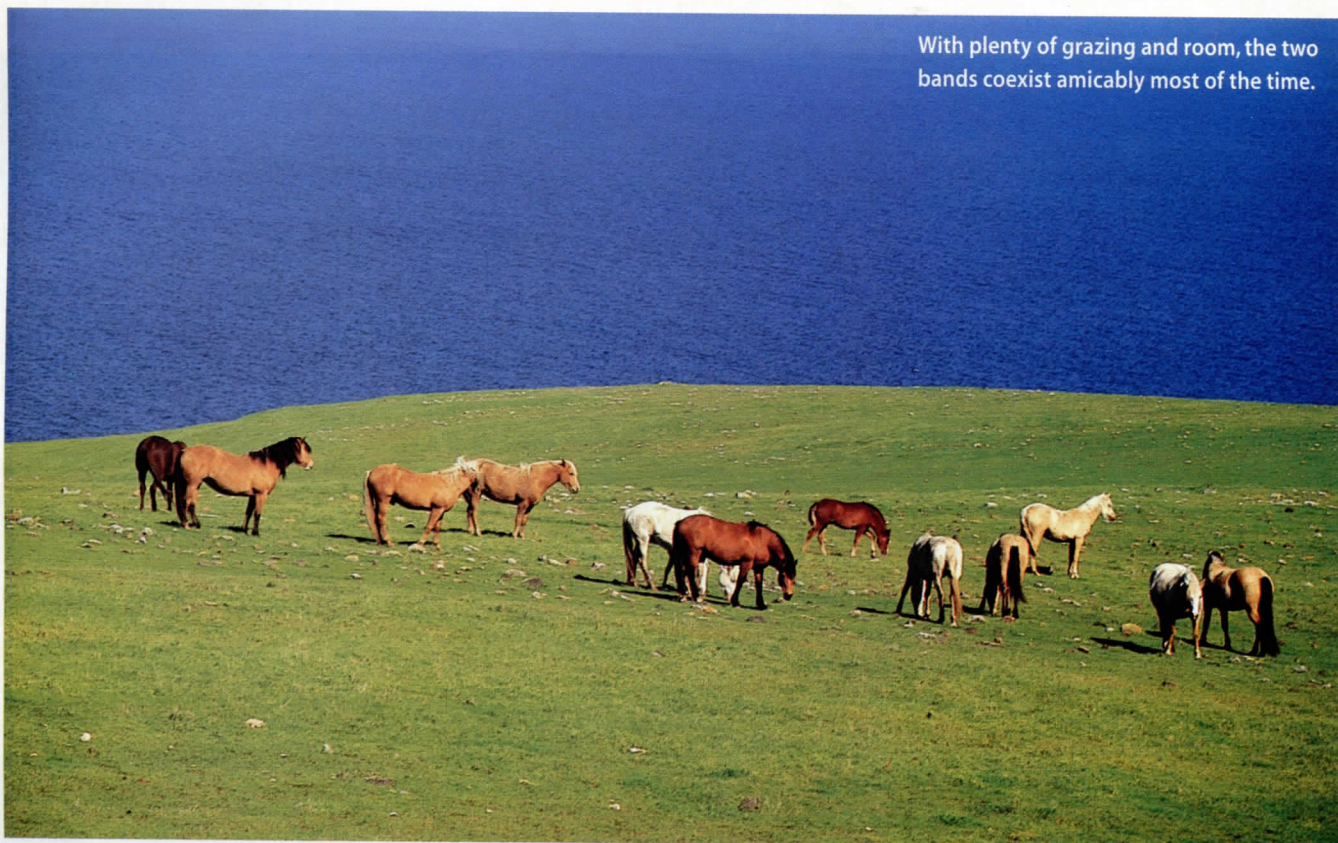
By the time you read this column, the

final chapter of the tiny, self-sufficient herd's story may have been written. If it has been, you may either rejoice or weep with me. If it hasn't, perhaps you can help tip the balance in favor of the wild horses of Santa Cruz.

First, the tangled history and thickening plot as I understand them and as they were related to me. Santa Cruz is a 62,000-acre island (in the gee-whiz

department, that's four times the size of Manhattan) in a chain of eight Channel Islands loosely embracing the southern California coast. From the perspective of a seaside Santa Barbara trail-rider, in spring Santa Cruz is lost — clotted in a bank of fog. On crystal October days, that same trail-rider can almost see the tiny legs of native sowbugs (they look like miniature armadillos) lockstepping

With plenty of grazing and room, the two bands coexist amicably most of the time.



OKARI WEISS

through ruts and furrows on the island's russet hills.

As long as eight thousand years ago, Chumash Indians inhabited Santa Cruz, whimsically believing that their people had sprouted there from magical seeds sowed by the Earth Goddess. The colonial Spanish, never much for whimsy, uprooted the Chumash by force and removed them to the mainland in the early 1800s. By mid-century, horses had arrived. A couple of decades later, a Frenchman, Justinian Caire, bought Santa Cruz and turned it into a thriving commercial operation with thousands of sheep and cattle, a vineyard, and scores of ranch buildings, including a two-story adobe house, a sheep-shearing shed, a slaughterhouse, a winery, two bunkhouses, a small milk-cow and stallion barn, a large horse barn, and a chapel.

About sixty years ago, the island was divided by Caire's descendants, the Gherini family, who kept the eastern tenth for themselves and sold the western nine tenths to Los Angeles businessman Edwin Stanton. So committed was Stanton's son, Carey, to safeguarding

Santa Cruz's history, resources, traditions, and isolation, that in the mid-1980s he sold the Stanton portion to the Virginia-based Nature Conservancy and established the Santa Cruz Island Foundation to care for his vast collection of historical and cultural treasures.

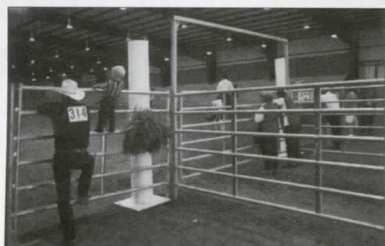
But change was in the air in Washington — and on the east end of the island as well, where the Gherini family had multiplied and, as you'll see, divided. In 1980, Congress had passed legislation creating the Channel Islands National Park: four other islands plus the Gherini portion of Santa Cruz (many believe there were hopes the Nature Conservancy portion would eventually be acquired as well). In 1984 a National Park Service General Master Plan (GMP) called for the removal of all "alien" species, including swine, sheep, cattle, elk, deer, and horses, in order to return the islands to their pristine natural state for the pleasure and edification of that most alien and unpriestine of species, the human visitor. In 1992, all but one of the Gherinis sold their shares to the National Park Service for a reported \$4 million

each and the right to use the ranch buildings for twenty-five years. The holdout — with one of the four original shares — was Francis Gherini, who appeared to acquire sole ownership of the herd when, during a so-called "statutory period" following the sale, the remainder of the family failed to make claim upon the horses. (A member of the Santa Cruz Island Foundation recalls Francis's nephew John saying during a phone conversation that he and other family members claimed no interest in the "inbred" horses.)

In 1994, Francis asked the Foundation to manage the herd with the help and advice of Karen and a blue-ribbon panel of veterinarians, geneticists, ecologists, and environmentalists — who soon realized that they'd stumbled on a scientific bonanza. The isolated herd, with DNA samples indicating it was on the brink of forming a new breed, and with an apparent ability to override the effects of light on estrous cycles — the mares were breeding and foaling when mainland mares were "deeply anestrus" — was an invaluable resource for studying everything from genetic makeup and ori-

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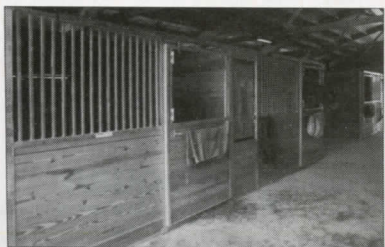


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gins to anatomy, conformation, and herd dynamics. The Foundation also designated the horses a "Heritage Herd" and proposed that the National Park Service preserve them as a national treasure and tourist attraction, much as Congress in 1995 passed legislation similarly protecting a free-roaming herd in the Ozark National Scenic Riverways Park.

But as Francis was about to find out, it's a risky business standing up to Uncle Sam. Last October, Congress enacted a "legislative taking" of his one share, enabling the National Park Service, on February 10, to assume full ownership and implement immediately the provisions of the GMP. According to Channel Islands National Park Superintendent Tim Setnicka, by May 11 the tiny horse herd and some 1500 sheep were to be gathered and shipped by barge to the mainland for separation and adoption. Clamorously on the superintendent's side

were Francis's nephews John and Tom Gherini, who simultaneously questioned the designation of the herd as exemplars of old working ranch horses ("These horses never worked a lick on the ranch," said John) and reasserted the entire family's ownership and right of disposal, according to an interview in the *Santa Barbara News-Press*. Desperately on the horses' side as the days dwindled down were Francis, Karen and her experts, plus a hastily formed grassroots group of local horsepeople — Save the Heritage Herd — who set about the delicate task of educating, without stepping on toes, everyone from the public to Superintendent Setnicka, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors, US Senators Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein, and Congressman Walter Capps.

Save the Heritage Herd has also set up a website (<http://home1.gte.net/tob/wild-horses/hherd.htm>), with many



The band has settled down after the social upheaval of this first foal from a non-alpha mare.

RICHARD ROSS

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photos of the horses (including the new cremello colt), background information, and names and addresses of park, personnel to write to. And it's circulated a petition (I signed at the Los Padres Trail Riders' annual Tack and Tog Sale) asking Supt. Setnicka to interpret the GMP to allow the herd to stay (he can do that) or to delete the herd from the list of "exotics" to be removed (he can do that, too). In the event he did neither, the petition asked Congressman Capps to initiate cleanup legislation to accomplish the same end. As this magazine went to press, the Gherinis were still firing intrafamilial salvos over ownership and Supt. Setnicka was playing his cards canily close to his vest, offering little more than a cold-comfort reassurance that he wouldn't make a final disposition until that dispute was settled.

So that's where matters stand. For preservation precedents, we need look no further than Assateague, home of the famous ponies of Chincoteague, but wild horses also grace other national parks, including Shackleford Banks and Ocracoke Island in North Carolina, Cumberland Island National Seashore in Georgia, and the aforementioned Ozark National Scenic Riverways Park in Missouri. Yet on Santa Cruz Island, both sides continue to argue the question of whether this tiny, scruffy, unprepossessing gaggle of horses, with their coarse features and tangled manes, should stay. Turn the question around: What horrible thing have they done, or will they do, that the successful and benign relationship they have forged with each other and the land needs to be shattered and they be summarily uprooted, disbanded, and put up for adoption (or, given discouraging revelations about what has happened to some horses "adopted" in Bureau of Land Management auctions, sent to slaughter)? Especially when Save the Heritage Herd has pledged to oversee and pay for their management, control, and health care?

Yes, the horses are a so-called "exotic" or "alien" species. But the shoot-in-the-footness of hasty and arbitrary implementation of well-meaning manage-

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ment plans has already been demonstrated on the island's Nature Conservancy side, where the abrupt removal of sheep and cattle has resulted not in a gentle restoration of timid native flora, but in a riotously smothering explosion of non-native fennel. Furthermore, a biologist at the University of California at Davis familiar with the island has stated unequivocally that with 62,000 acres to roam, the Heritage Herd "not only would have a negligible adverse impact, they would have a zero — repeat, ZERO — adverse impact on the environment."

So please add your voice to mine as I say: C'mon, National Park Service, you work for us. If you haven't already blown it, get a grip. For more than 150 years, horses have been a part of the landscape of Santa Cruz Island. These horses are the only free-roaming island horse herd west of the Mississippi. With conformation so reflective of the old working ranch horse, they are a cultural treasure — living artifacts of a vibrant period of California history. In their isolation and harmonious interaction with the island ecosystem, they are a scientific bonanza.

But more than anything, this little band of horses is a national symbol that ennoble us all. As these self-sufficient, peaceful, resilient creatures run free over the rugged hills of Santa Cruz against a forever backdrop of clear sky and misty sea, they are a living reminder that if our great country isn't about the will to be free, it isn't about anything at all. ■

How can you add your voice? Call or write your own US senators and Congressional representative; check the blue pages in your phone book for their local offices, or call the Senate (202-224-3121) and House (202-225-3121) for the direct numbers of their Washington offices. You can ask them to convey your concern to the appropriate people, including the Park Service, Senators Boxer and Feinstein, and Congressman Capps. You can also write National Park Service Director Roger Kennedy at PO Box 37127, Washington, DC 20013, or call his office at 202-485-9880.



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| Ox Ridge | June 9-15 |
| Fairfield | June 17-21 |
| I Love NY | July 2-6 |
| Hampton Classic | Aug 24-31 |

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| Palm Beach Masters | Feb 19-23 |
| Ocala Masters | Feb 19-23 |
| Tournament of Champ | Mar 26-30 |
| Middleburg Classic | Sept 16-21 |
| Upperville | June 2-8 |
| Roanoke | June 16-22 |
| Lex-Mdburg National | Aug 6-10 |

MIDWEST REGION

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| Brownland Farm II | April 24-27 |
| KY Spring Classic | May 14-18 |
| Detroit | June 17-22 |
| Keybank H/J Classic | July 9-13 |
| Turfway Classic | July 15-20 |
| Bluegrass Festival | Aug 13-17 |

SOUTH CENTRAL REGION

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| San Antonio X-mas | Dec 4-8, 1996 |
| Texas Shoot-out | April 18-20 |
| Las Colinas Classic | May 14-18 |
| Rocky Mt. Classic | July 9-13 |
| CO Summer Classic | July 16-20 |
| Silver Dollar I | July 23-27 |
| Silver Dollar II | July 30-Aug 3 |
| Austin Classic | Sept 4-7 |

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| Desert Circuit IV | Feb. 19-23 |
| Kern County Fair | April 15-20 |
| Del Mar National | April 29-May 4 |
| Ranch and Coast | May 7-11 |
| Pebble Beach | July 29-Aug 3 |
| Menlo Circus Club | Aug 6-10 |

NORTHWEST REGION

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| Spring National | April 15-20 |
| Michelob I | July 16-20 |
| Michelob II | July 23-27 |
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HORSE CARE QUIZ

*Can you separate the
myths from the facts?
Test your parasite IQ.*

by Dr. Karen E. N. Hayes, D.V.M., M.S.

1. T or F: A horse in show condition, with a slick, shiny haircoat and strong hooves, doesn't need to be dewormed as often as every 8 weeks.

FALSE. A healthy external appearance doesn't necessarily mean "worm-free," it means "they haven't overwhelmed me yet." The scruffy, underweight, potbellied look of the heavily parasitized horse means he's already suffered extensive damage to internal organs (from larvae tunneling through them), and intestines (where the worms set up housekeeping and lay eggs). Eliminating worms before they start passing eggs can keep your horse's environment cleaner and keep him healthier. Deworming every 8 weeks with a proven, broad-spectrum agent such as ivermectin is a good way to get started.

2. T or F: The development of resistant parasites is a problem with all dewormers.

FALSE. Although it's true that benzimidazole-resistant small strongyles have become a dangerous equine health threat, they're not a problem when your choice of dewormer is ivermectin. Over 120 million doses have been administered worldwide, and still there is no evidence of resistance of any horse parasite to ivermectin.

3. T or F: Bots are a concern only in the fall.

FALSE. Fall is traditionally considered "bot season," but this is misleading. Bot flies are busiest in the fall, depositing eggs on your horse's forelegs, shoulders, throat and lips. But they're also active in spring and summer, and in areas with mild winters their activity can be virtually yearlong. Once the eggs hatch and the larvae enter the tissues in your horse's mouth, they don't care what the weather's like: they burrow to the stomach and attach to its lining, where they can cause ulcers, bleeding, even blockage or colic. The longer they're allowed to remain, the more damage they do. For better bot control, and better health, give a boticide at the start of flying insect season in the spring, and repeat every 8 weeks until one month after the first killing freeze. Ivermectin is the only boticide I recommend for this program — not only is it highly effective, it has a wide margin of safety.

¹ Christine A. Uhlinger, V.M.D., M.P.H., NC State Univ., *Uses of Fecal Egg Count in Equine Practice. The Compendium - Vol. 15, No. 5, May 1993, 742-748.*

² T.M. Craig, D.V.M., Ph.D., and Charles H. Courtney, D.V.M., Ph.D. *Epidemiology and Control of Parasites in Warm Climates. Veterinary Clinics of North America: Equine Practice - Vol. 2, No. 2, August 1986, 357-365.*